

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 11NEW REPUBLIC  
26 August 1985

A course for aspiring mercenaries.

## SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS

*Hueytown, Alabama*

ON JUNE 24, the day after Air India's Flight 182 plunged into the Atlantic, Secretary of State George Shultz publicly deplored the recent wave of terrorism. First the TWA hijacking to Beirut, then a bomb blast at the Frankfurt airport, and now the Air India crash, which, along with an explosion the same day at an airport near Tokyo, was thought to be the work of Sikh terrorists.

Denouncing "the despicable acts of terrorists," Shultz proclaimed, "All nations must unite in decisive action to curb this threat." Vice President George Bush took time out from his trip to Rome to call for "a redoubling of international efforts to safeguard innocent people against this kind of terror."

BOTH MEN missed the local angle. Lal Singh, one of the Sikhs suspected by the FBI of having had a hand in the Air India crash (and currently at large) had received paramilitary training right here in the United States, with no apparent objection from federal, state, or local authorities. Last November Lal Singh and three other radical Sikhs came to this woody western suburb of Birmingham to learn combat and survival techniques at The Mercenary School. Now three of them are being sought by the FBI in connection with various alleged crimes, including not only the sabotage of the Air India flight but also assassination plots against Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and a prominent minister in his government, Bhajan Lal, while they were in the U.S. (The fourth Sikh is in jail.)

Jimmy, who works at The Merc School, as it is familiarly known here, showed me around headquarters, a warehouse called The Bunker. In a room decorated with maps of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Lebanon, he helped me identify an international assortment of guns hanging from two racks: a Soviet AK-47, an American M-16, a Chinese grenade launcher just like one that appeared in *Red Dawn*. Some of these weapons—the Chinese rocket grenade, for example—are replicas, fully authentic in every way except their ability to fire. Others, like the M-16 and the AK-47, are real. Especially prized are the school's three working submachine guns. Jimmy unzipped each from its leather pouch: a British Sterling ("That's what I'm getting. These things are wonderful"), an Israeli Uzi ("the Real McCoy," not the semi-automatic version you see in gun shops), and a MAC-10 automatic, the weapon of choice in today's drug wars. "All the students get to fire all three," Jimmy explained.

The Mercenary School offers its two-week course in combat and survival about half a dozen times each year at a cost of \$350 (\$75 more if you don't have your own personal gear). Carried out mostly in the field, the course includes training both in survival techniques (rappelling, foraging, land navigation) and in hard-core combat (sniper fire, hand-to-hand combat, explosives and booby traps). I arrived on the last day of the most recent class, too late to witness the field combat training, but Frank Camper, proprietor of The Merc School since he opened it in 1981, insists it is as rough as any offered by the U.S. military, if not more so. Probably the most dangerous exercise is "live fire," where students make their way up a 15-foot-wide creek while real bullets are shot along the banks.

The class one naturally wonders the most about is Demolition. The Sikhs told Camper that they wanted to learn how to make time bombs—it was a time bomb that went off in the Tokyo airport and probably caused the Air India crash. The man who teaches Demolition goes by the nickname Pablo, acquired on missions to the Nicaragua-Honduras border under the sponsorship of the Alabama-based Civilian Military Assistance group, a mercenary organization currently trying to ingratiate itself to Congress and the CIA. He has also fought with Major Saad Haddad's army in Lebanon. Pablo was firm about not using his real name for this article ("I got too much to do. Hate to have to come lookin' for you"), but he let me sit in on his explosives class. He passed around the various kinds of grenades: pineapple (World War II vintage), baseball (the kind "Americans can throw"), and a few others, none of them operable. Some replica sticks of dynamite were also passed around, along with a mine, also inoperable, boldly lettered, FRONT TOWARD ENEMY. Pablo offered a few suggestions about how to rig booby traps with the grenades, some hints about making fuses, and assorted bits of practical wisdom. (You can use Christmas tree bulbs as detonators.) The closest he came to explaining how to make a bomb was when he showed us some ammonium nitrate (a common fertilizer) and said that it can be ignited when a fuel-oil base is added and a blasting cap is rigged. "Naturally you can attach them to any kind of timing device," he said, but he didn't tell us how to work one.

In truth, I was not left with the feeling that I could head off to my local True Value and construct a bomb in my basement. (Anyway, a full understanding of the basics is readily available to anyone who pays a trip to the public library.) But I did feel a bit uneasy as Pablo showed us how to rig a tripwire for a booby trap, and when he told us how, in Lebanon, he took the fuses off a few grenades, then rolled them over the Syrian border. "Them morons picked them up," he said, and when the Syrians later pulled the pins to throw them they blew themselves up. Clearly Pablo was within his First Amend-

Continued